

The Dank outsider: Giving up

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Self-sacrifice is in and it's amazing what you can do without. And, of course, you feel far superior to the slobs who won't, don't you?

The Dank outsider

Giving up



Jane Ellison

RAYMOND DANK is crouching in the kitchen of his dark, malodorous pothole described by estate agents as a basement flat. A fog of cigarette smoke hangs in the air. In front of him on the formica-topped table is an ashtray overflowing with stubbed-out Marlboros and a smeared half-empty whisky glass. Around him are piles of yellowing newspapers that were once an acre of Norwegian forest. Dank looks at his watch. He is late for a dinner party at Clive and Cynthia Vertue's dockland duplex. Hastily he inspects his burgeoning wine rack and seizes a choice bottle of powerful Barolo, stuffed full of tannin and artificial colouring. Leaving the flat, he grabs his potent aerosol "air sanitiser" and jets an ozone-hostile blast behind him to annihilate all known odours and airborne bacteria while he is out. For good measure, he ambushes his cat and showers it with a good blast of highly toxic flea spray (also deadly to the ozone layer). Outside, his ageing Renault Five is dripping oil onto the street. He leaps in, pulls out the choke and emits a stifling cloud of lead-abundant exhaust gas as he roars off in search of adventure, pausing only to empty his choked ashtray on to the pavement behind him.

Raymond Dank is not the sort of guest you and I welcome these days. He is walking death to the planet, a one-man band of toxic effluent and — worst of all — he has no compunction about the damage he's doing to other people's environment. The only good thing about him is that we can feel superior to him, because we've all given up the things he still does every day.

Clive and Cynthia Vertue certainly feel superior to him. They are already apologising for him to their other, more caring guests.

Arriving with his bottle of additive-friendly red, Dank immediately pulls out his pack of Marlboro, cheerfully observing that no one will mind if he smokes. There is a shocked silence. Everyone else has, naturally, given up. "I'm sorry, Raymond," says Clive softly. "But we do rather mind, actually. There is a significant risk of getting lung cancer from passive smoking, you know."

They sit down to dinner. Dank's bottle is uncorked and passed round the table. One by one, the right hand of each guest flies up over the glass. "Not for me, thanks. I'm driving"; "I've given up red, actually"; "I don't drink any more on weekdays". Piggish and obscene, Dank slugs down his brimming red in solitary, brutish indulgence.

Renouncing the world used to be popular with those about to enter full-time religious instruction. But its appeal has spread lately. Everyone is busily giving up activities which, until now, were a normal part of human behaviour. It is not enough simply to stop using, say, drink or cigarettes or biological washing powder.

"Giving up" has taken on the fervour of religious conversion. Those newly converted to the refusal of tap water or artificial preservatives find it necessary to broadcast their self-denial at every opportunity. Even worse, they exorcise those who are still drinking themselves to death or polluting the environment. The mere act of "giving up" confers the illusion of moral virtue. If you've given something up, you can't help feeling you are a better person than poor old Raymond Dank, still yielding to his baser, animal appetites.

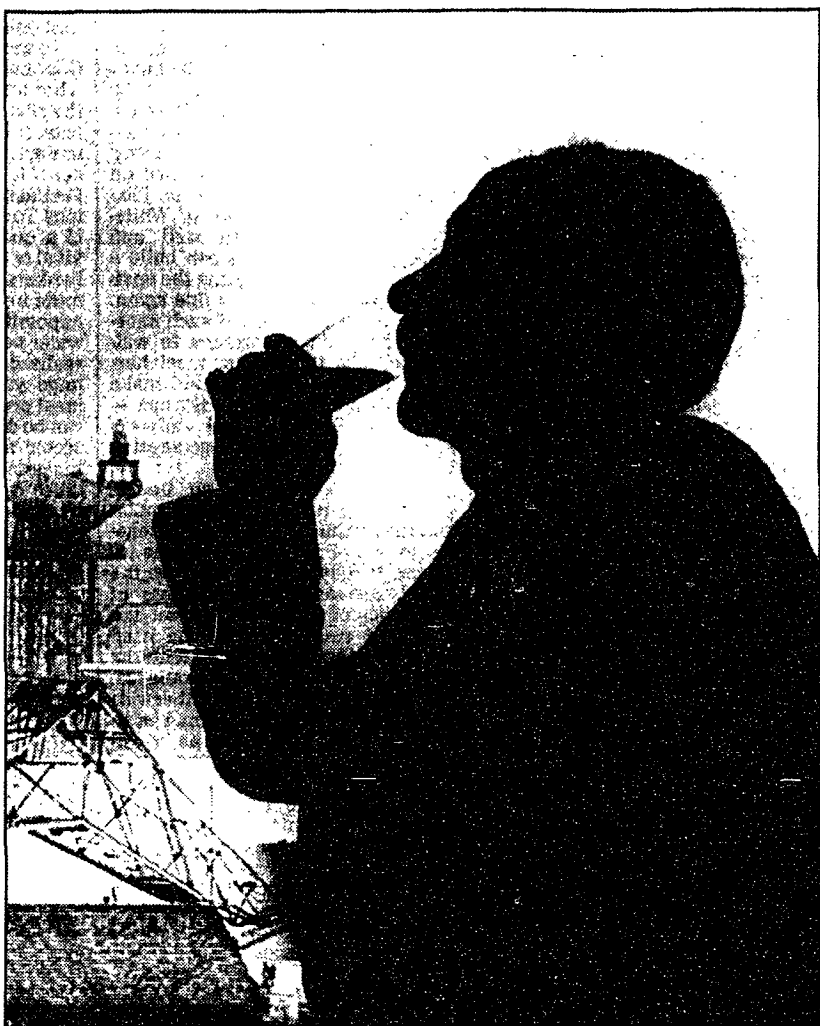
It takes real courage, now, to be the person who asks for wine at an all-Perrier lunch. To do so is to acknowledge publicly that you are at the bottom of the grossest rubbish heap. But what is the ethical basis for the idea, now universally accepted, that those who smoke and drink and take no exercise are morally inferior to those who watch their weight, drink fizzy water and go to the gym three times a week? Of course, giving up gin and tonic and steak is pretty old hat these days. Clive and Cynthia Vertue gave up red meat years ago together with all cholesterol-stuffed fats (except olive oil). They have moved on since then. Cynthia will be dropping into the Ideal Home Exhibition this week with a smile of smug self-congratulation. The Green Kitchen on Stand 500 holds no surprises for her. She has

already given up environment-hostile oven cleaner and has had a special filter fitted to her washing machine to remove non-biodegradable detergents. She has given up coloured lavatory paper in a desire to keep rivers from from dioxins. She even sent back a new kitchen table last week when she discovered it was made from wood from the endangered Brazilian rain forest, and thus contributing to the Greenhouse Effect. She can't quite bring herself to give up the fridge, but she and Clive had already agreed to follow Mrs Thatcher's advice not to buy another until the new ozone-friendly model is on the market.

Still, there are other things the Vertues can renounce. There was a spot of difficulty on the domestic front when they gave up aerosols. Obviously, Clive was perfectly happy with shaving soap, but the daily turned a little hard to handle when they stopped her using spray polish. Now, a fine, sticky layer of wax polish coats the glass topped table and the mirror since Mrs Scourer says she can't get the stuff to come off but that's a minor problem compared to a hole in the ozone layer.

Clive caused rather a scene the other day, when he leaped out of the car in mid-Super Valet to ask the cleaning team if the Minty Fresh Interior Spray was ozone friendly. But he's thinking of giving up the car anyway. He already has to drive 20 minutes to a garage to fill up with lead-free petrol and there is always a bad-tempered queue. And since they're thinking of giving up London, they will probably be much better off with a bicycle each to the local railway station. A lot of their friends have given up the city. "Oh, we never regretted the move. You can leave the back door open all day, it's marvellous and the schools are so much better."

Of course, they will be rather cut off from life out in the peace of Oxfordshire or Norfolk, particularly since they've decided to give up newspapers. "Yes, we don't miss them at all really, in fact it's amazing how much time you waste with all that reading in the morning, half an hour's gone before you've done anything at all." Besides, they are actually keeping trees alive instead of being pulped into newsprint. But there is always the radio to keep in touch. Of course, they've given up Radio 4 these days since it went so down-market with all those dreadful continuity people



"Everyone is renouncing normal human activity."

PHOTOGRAPH: DENIS THORPE

called Pauline and Eugene; and they've given up Radio 3 ever since it started doing all those obscure composers of the week and ignoring Mozart. But they find the World Service absolutely marvellous. "It's amazing what good programmes you discover and, of course, the news service is excellent, so unbiased which is pretty rare for the BBC these days."

They gave up television last month — "No, we don't miss it at all" — and have discovered the joy of children's play: old-fashioned games like Hunt the Thimble and Charades instead of Neighbours and Postman Pat. Cynthia's nanny is looking

tired but loving every minute of it and the children will soon get used to it. And in the evenings, when they used to keep the television on after the News, just to see what was coming next, Cynthia and Clive actually sit and talk to each other, discovering the lost art of conversation, just like families used to. They play Monopoly and Cynthia does embroidery.

Clive and Cynthia's next target is sex. A lot of their friends have given it up and, amazingly, they haven't missed it very much. Quite frankly, sex can be very draining. They both work such frightful hours, it's hard to be really fresh for a

breakfast meeting after a late night rolling round the sheets. Most of their friends feel the same way.

But the Vertues can tell you more themselves. They're longing for a chance to. And if their resolve starts to crumble, then they have only to look at poor Raymond Dank, in his headlong flight towards carcinoma, to know that they really are living a better life than he is. After all, with luck, he will die before he is 50, having cost the Health Service thousands of pounds; while glorious old age beckons the Vertues, who might even get a telegram from the Queen.